

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1947

Volume VIII, Number 20

Rachel W. Coffin, Editor

Week of December 1, 1947

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1947 PRODUCTIONS

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THEATRE OPENINGS

"Antony and Cleopatra"

Theatre Critics Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they
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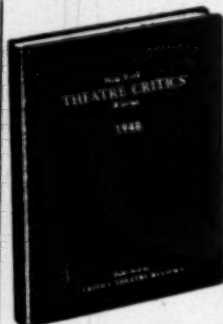
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"Antony and Cleopatra"

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

NOVEMBER 27, 1947

By **HOWARD BARNES**

In the Great Tradition

KATHARINE CORNELL'S "Antony and Cleopatra," at the Martin Beck, is a rare and memorable production. The actress-manager has mounted the Shakespeare drama in all its original grandeur. While evoking the full passion and poetry of its incomparable scenes, she has kept it a fluent, many-faceted and absorbing tragedy. The great passages come through with singing eloquence in the performance which she, Godfrey Tearle, Kent Smith and the others of a large and accomplished company give them. Over and beyond the fine and articulate acting looms the magnificent account of a late-blooming and tortured love affair, the intrigues of an empire which was the world, and the fall of a dynasty.

It took immense courage and imagination for Miss Cornell and her director husband, Guthrie Mc-

Clintic, to hew to the original text. With almost no elisions, the offering gives heed to alarums and excursions as well as the soaring interludes which have made the play a favorite of scholars, even though they contended that it defied tensile stage expression. In a miraculous fashion they have succeeded in their attempt to fuse an magnificent love story with a somber tale of man's fate. The simple Leo Kers settings shift with magical speed; the costumes by Valentina and John Hoyt are perfectly suited to the regal splendor of the proceedings and McClintic has rarely failed to keep the action significant and uncluttered with hortatory histrionics.

Against the spacious and luminous tapestry of the production Miss Cornell and her colleagues move with infinite grace, timing and authority. As the queen who was impervious to the ravages of time and custom, the star turns in one of her most splendid portrayals. There is scarcely a moment at the Martin Beck when she is not utterly convincing. Her mannerisms are bent to the exigencies of the role itself, as she remembers Caesar, holds Antony in her magical sway, or faces the final anguish of de-

feat and death. There is a lack of feeling at times in her performance, but it is always arresting.

On his part Tearle contributes a particularly sensitive and modulated characterization of the man who humbled kings, but could not withstand the blandishments of the Egyptian. To a remarkable degree he combines the attributes of a stern and successful soldier with the swooning capitulation of an aging lover. Even better than he is Kent Smith, who handles the wonderful part of Enobarbus as though he had never played any other. His reading of the famous speech in which he describes Cleopatra is perfect and his doubtful following of his leader to a tragic doom is carried off beautifully.

The others add telling bits to the mounting crescendo of the scenes. Ivan Simpson is particularly good as Lepidus, one of the trimvirs who took over the Roman Empire after Julius Caesar's death. Ralph Clanton is properly boyish and imperial as Octavius and Lenore Ulric has a few moments of forceful playing as Charmian. It is a long production of "Antony and Cleopatra" which Miss Cornell has

'ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA'

Play by William Shakespeare; staged by Guthrie McClintic; settings by Leo Kers; music by Paul Nordoff; women's costumes by Valentina; men's costumes by John Hoyt; presented by Katharine Cornell at the Martin Beck Theater Wednesday evening, November 26, 1947.

The cast:

Philo	Alan Sharpe
Demetrius	Theodore Marcuse
Antony	Godfrey Tearle
Cleopatra	Katharine Cornell
A Messenger	David J. Stewart
Dolabella	Robert Duke
Proculeius	Charlotte Heston
Iras	Maurice Stapleton
Charmian	Lenore Ulric
Alrexas	Oliver Cliff
Diomedes	Elly Wallace
Enobarbus	Kent Smith
Mardian	Joseph Wiseman
Octavius Caesar	Ralph Clanton
Lepidus	Ivan Simpson
Agrippa	David Orick
Pompey	Joseph Holland
Menas	Martin Kingsley
Varrius	Marcel Bino
Ventidius	Bruce Gordon
Octavia	Betty Low
Canidius	Douglas Watson
Eros	Charles Burt
Silius	Robert Currier
Thynus	Robert Currier
Gallus	Robert Currier
An Old Soldier	Bruce Gordon
Scarus	Anthony Randall
Euphrosina	Ernest Rowan
Dercetas	Martin Kingsley
A Clown	Oliver Cliff

SYNOPSIS: Part I. The action takes place in Egypt, Italy and Syria. Part II. The action takes place in Greece and Egypt.

presented, perhaps too long for average theater-goers. For those who care to see one of the great plays of all time in its whole beauty, it is tremendously rewarding.

The New York Times

NOVEMBER 27, 1947

AT THE THEATRE

By **BROOKS ATKINSON**

In honor of Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra," Katharine Cornell and her husband have staged a beautiful and respectful production, which was put on at the Martin Beck last evening. The tragedy is a difficult one with a broken story line, and few actresses have been happy in it. But believing that what is worth doing is worth doing well, Miss Cornell and Mr. McClintic have rounded up a good cast, mounted a gorgeous production and packed almost three hours with a painfully faithful transcript of Shakespeare's story.

Out of respect for the quality of

their work, it is unpleasant to report that this "Antony and Cleopatra" is on the formal side and not without pedantry. Miss Cornell, our queen of tragedy, rises nobly to the tragic situations. When Antony is lost and her world has been shattered, she presides over the drama with radiant majesty. In fact, her grandest scene is the last when, attired in her reigning roles, she dies royally on the throne and outshines those who are still among the living. To one of the most memorable scenes Shakespeare ever wrote she brings the style, authority and incandescence that become her best.

But apart from being a queen, Cleopatra is also the world's most celebrated coquette—sensual as well as capricious. As a poet Shakespeare admires her, but as a man he knows she is a royal slut. The qualities of character we esteem in Miss Cornell are not those of "the Egyptian dish" that has drugged Mark Antony's will to action. That is the basic weakness of this beautifully caparisoned per-

formance. Miss Cornell's Cleopatra is formal, good-mannered, a little fastidious. This is what well-bred people would like to think a Shakespeare tragedy is. It is pictorial, but drafty.

As Antony, Godfrey Tearle has style and force, and ably portrays the whole varying sequence of one of the great tragic parts. Tick him off a little for being no great lover in a part steeped in amour, but credit him bountifully for his intelligence and understanding.

As the witty and skeptical Enobarbus, Kent Smith gives the most successful performance of the evening. He is lucid in his reading of verse. His performance is flowing, accomplished, clearly outlined and perceptive. Lenore Ulric's Charmian is unresolving as a character and undistinguished as acting; and Ralph Clanton's Octavius Caesar is hardly more than bluster. In the affectionate part of Eros, Douglas Watson has at least one excellent scene. There are good performances in other parts in a

long cast of actors.

No one will quickly forget the visual beauty of this rich production. Valentina's costumes, especially those for Miss Cornell, are vivid and overwhelming, though they also are too well-bred for Shakespeare's unscrupulous courtesan; and John Hoyt's costumes for the men are also beautifully designed. Leo Kers's settings give the production spaciousness and grandeur.

But perhaps these costly adornments are more impediment than assistance. They help to make "Antony and Cleopatra" a stately ritual which is admirable but detached and scholarly. There is more good taste than Shakespeare in this stage version of an amour that wrecked an empire. To Shakespeare, Cleopatra was passionate and dangerous, and her affair with Antony was an expensive debauch. Miss Cornell's wickedness is not very sinful.

New York Post

NOVEMBER 28, 1947

Miss Cornell Splendid In a Great Tragedy

By **RICHARD WATTS JR.**

Miss Cornell has put all sensible theatergoers in her debt once more, this time by a stunning production of a play particularly

difficult to do, Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra." There are many of us who had virtually given up hope of seeing a satisfying performance of this magnificent tragedy of aging, weary passion in a world of collapsing empires, so great are the problems of proper acting and staging that always seem to face it. What Miss Cornell provided at the Martin Beck Theatre Wednesday night was not merely a competent presentation of a drama which has eluded the skill of

virtually everyone else who has attempted the task. She has given us what is certainly one of the most stirring versions of a Shakespearean work to be seen in our time.

There are so many things which must go right if "Antony and Cleopatra" is to achieve the necessary stature of great tragedy in the theatre. There must be not only distinguished performances in the title roles, but a properly fine portrayal of the witty, cynical, eloquent spectator, Enobarbus, and expert playing in half a dozen lesser roles.

There must be a kind of rich, tumultuous spaciousness in the production to suggest the earth-shaking events of power politics against which the passionate drama of Egypt's queen and the man who ruled one third of the world was acted. There must be captured a quality that retains the realistic atmosphere of spiritual disintegration without losing the lyric loveliness of the story.

Vitality and Beauty

In all these respects Miss Cornell and her associates have

"Antony and Cleopatra"—continued

been triumphantly successful. For one thing the production has a wonderful air of vitality and movement about it. For another it is always beautiful to look at. Miss Cornell is visually superb, and the settings, costumes and lighting are dramatically satisfying in themselves, in addition to their pictorial excellence. Furthermore, Guthrie McClintic's direction is imaginative and resourceful, capturing the qualities of the play in all their variety and power. Finally, there is the excellence of the acting.

As Cleopatra, Miss Cornell is

not only visually but dramatically exciting, creating that air of tragic beauty that can be so magically hers. All I can say of her performance is that every quality which Shakespeare set down in describing the infinite variety of his heroine comes to life in her portrayal. As Antony, Godfrey Tearle succeeds admirably in depicting the lost greatness of the doomed, broken lover who had once dominated Rome's far-flung empire.

Enobarbus

Equally important, if "Antony and Cleopatra" is not to lose its

sense of dramatic fullness, is the role of Enobarbus, the hapless bystander caught up in the tragedy that is taking place about him. It is in great part through his eyes that the meaning of the drama is presented to the spectator, and unless he is made a man of quality and stature, with a sophisticated wit and keen, ironical understanding, a great deal of the play's spell is lost. Kent Smith, giving the best performance of his career in the theatre, is notably successful in making Enobarbus the central figure he must be.

Ralph Clanton, who was so good as De Guiche in Jose Ferrer's "Cyrano" last year, is an impressive Octavius, and there are a number of excellent performances in lesser parts, particularly by Joseph Holland as Pompey, Ivan Simpson as Lepidus and David J. Stewart as the queen's luckless messenger. Because it succeeds so excitingly in giving life to one of the most famous of tragedies, Miss Cornell's "Antony and Cleopatra" makes theatrical history.

Daily Mirror

NOVEMBER 27, 1947

Cornell's Cleopatra Is a Triumph

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Those reports from the road are true. Actress-Manager Katharine Cornell has given us a superlative production of "Antony and Cleopatra." It is, in fact, the only satisfactory production we've seen in our time.

"Antony and Cleopatra" is one of Shakespeare's most difficult plays to present. The first half is dominated by Antony, Caesar, Lepidus and Pompey, and most of the second half by Cleopatra.

Antony, Lepidus and young Caesar have split the world between them. Antony is the aging

soldier, Lepidus the aged compromiser-politician and Caesar the arrogant, prissy, able youth with a chip on his shoulder.

Young Pompey, the rough, tough, piratical campaigner lacked the stature and duplicity to cope with Caesar. Antony

softened up his mind, physique and army amid the debilitating luxuries of Cleopatra's Egypt. They proved pushovers for the aggressive master of Rome.

Throughout their battles royal, Cleo is something of a sponsor girl, sitting on the sidelines, cheering on her favorite, who happens to be Antony. But after Antony's defeat and suicide, Cleo comes into her own. She has the stage almost to herself and glories in one of the longest death scenes in stage history.

Miss Cornell plays that lengthy scene beautifully. She achieves emotional power with regal dignity and without chewing scenery. Her performance is always under control, cleverly shaded, soft when it should be, robust when fitting.

Godfrey Tearle, who bears an amazing resemblance to the late President Roosevelt, and Ralph Clanton excel as the weary An-

tony and the ruthless Caesar. Kent Smith is an amazingly fine Enobarbus. Ivan Simpson and Joseph Holland do ample justice to Lepidus and Pompey. And Lenore Ulric makes a welcome return to the local stage as Charmian.

Director Guthrie McClintic has made "Antony and Cleopatra" thrilling to hear, while Leo Kerz, Valentina and John Boyt have made it stunning to see. Pictorially, it is by all odds the most magnificent Shakespearean production yet glimpsed in New York.

The team of Cornell and McClintic approached "Antony and Cleopatra" with loving and lavish hand. The smallest roles have been cast with the best available

actors. And it is gratifying to discover at the Martin Beck Theatre how many gifted young classical actors we have.

DAILY NEWS

NOVEMBER 27, 1947

Mr. Tearle's Antony Is Thrilling; Miss Cornell's Cleopatra Lovely

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Katharine Cornell's production of "Antony and Cleopatra" is an impressive presentation of one of Shakespeare's most difficult and most rewarding dramas. As was to be

expected, Miss Cornell is a pictorially radiant Queen, and she makes admirable use of her not unlimited resources as an actress. And it is her great good fortune to have, as her Antony, Godfrey Tearle.

Mr. Tearle is truly the kind of actor one likes to think of as a Shakespearean actor—a player of such complete authority that he measures up to the poet's work. In the role of Antony there is much to cope with, from the revels and passions of "gaudy nights" down

through the gallant yet pitiful struggle against a tragic destiny. Shakespeare's Antony is a man full-size—a commanding figure in battle, a canny one in intrigue, a brave one in defeat and a madman in love. Mr. Tearle's Antony was, to me at the Martin Beck last evening, Shakespeare's; it is a performance of outstanding quality.

A Fine Supporting Cast

Outstanding in quality, too, is the production as a whole. It is a beautiful thing to see, with vault-

ing, spacious settings by Leo Kerz and remarkably striking costumes by John Boyt and Valentina. It is, on the whole, a beautiful thing to hear, for Miss Cornell has spared no energies in assembling an unusually worthy supporting cast.

Among the many on hand to give first-rate help is Lenore Ulric, who gives a delightful flash of the lusty Lenore we used to know in her first scene as one of Cleopatra's hand-maidens. Another is Joseph Holland, a wonderfully blustering pirate Pompey. Ralph Clanton's Octavius Caesar is an excellent figure of youthful willfulness, and Ivan Simpson's Lepidus is another worthy piece of characterization.

Of the principals of the company, only one failed to come up

to my hopes—Kent Smith, as Enobarbus. Enobarbus, Antony's best friend and severest critic, is important to a witness who wants to keep well ordered in his mind the ramifications of Shakespeare's doings in the drama. I couldn't help feeling that Mr. Smith was uncertain when he should have been certain, although he was quite effective in his suicide scene.

Miss Cornell's Cleopatra is, as she should be, a queen of swift passions and considerable guile. Her own death scene is modestly and becomingly contrived, and she is most impressive in the moments when she learns that her Antony has married Caesar's sister. She does, I think, have a habit of speaking too impetuously under emotional stress, letting words tumble forth in a burst and thereby losing some of their clarity and beauty.

"Antony and Cleopatra" is a very difficult drama to bring off, and I think Miss Cornell and her company are to be congratulated for having done so well by it. Guthrie McClintic, the director, has paced it as crisply as the many scenes permit. (There are, by the way, two acts.) But it is Mr. Tearle's performance which gives the evening its finest quality.

"Antony and Cleopatra"—continued

The Sun

NOVEMBER 23, 1947

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

Triumph for Miss Cornell.

The dauntless Katharine Cornell's "Antony and Cleopatra" has beauty, power and grandeur and I do not hesitate to proclaim it one of the finest achievements of her career. Her new production of a tragedy that has been done intermittently, and with scant success, in the American theater for the past 100 years, was installed Wednesday evening at the Martin Beck.

The Cornell-McClintic "Antony and Cleopatra"—yes, the knowing hand of McClintic is apparent from beginning to end—is theater for the eyes and ears. Their production of one of the longest of the Shakespearean plays has been staged beautifully, unsparringly and swiftly, and it creates and sustains an emotional impact. "Antony and Cleopatra" is a difficult, diffuse and complex play. It is one that has frequently thwarted successful revelation in the theater. But in the superior playing of Miss Cornell and her associates, down to the smallest of the men's roles, and in the direction and lighting of McClintic, the old piece is given life and movement. There is now

something really magnificent upon the stage of the Martin Beck.

Shakespeare's tragedy of those middle-life lovers, the Roman statesman-soldier and the Queen of the Nile, is a play of disillusionment, distrust, bitterness, despair and self-destruction. Miss Cornell and McClintic have stuck to the text, making few cuts. The play is now staged in two parts as it recites its story of Antony's leaving of Cleopatra, his establishment of a false peace with Octavius Caesar, his compromise marriage with Octavia, his return to Cleopatra, his defeat by Caesar in battle, and his suicide, followed by that of Cleopatra.

The play's multiple scenes, with

the locale shifting from Egypt to Rome and back again, are playing against striking backgrounds by Leo Kers. There is extraordinary fluidity to the production; there are few waits. And as the action is almost continuous and the poetry is spoken by players who, for the most part, enunciate clearly, the dramatic force of the play is steadily cumulative.

Consider the Cleopatra of Miss Cornell. Once a tragic Malayan princess, once a girlish Juliet, once a St. Joan of surpassing beauty, Miss Cornell now wears the raiment of Egypt's queen, and she distinguishes herself. There is magic in her swift changes of mood—she is, by turn, coquettish, guileful, sensual, wanton, tempestuous, rhapsodic and wretched. Her best moments come when she lets loose her uncontrollable rage over the news of Antony's marriage to Octavia, and in her death scene, when she calls for her robe and her crown.

Godfrey Tearle, the actor of the startling resemblance to the late Franklin D. Roosevelt, is impressive as the infatuated Antony. He has stature and authority and he accurately projects the picture of a desolated man—haggard, disintegrating, his empire shattered—as he chooses his sword as the only way out.

Kent Smith, an able actor, has

great force as the misogynistic Enobarbus, the cynical, critical, prophetic and traitorous Roman warrior, who, despising himself, dies by his own hand. Lenore Ulric does all that can be done with the part of the devoted and slavish Charmian. Ralph Clanton, of the thundering voice, makes the youthful Octavius Caesar a man of action and decision. Ivan Simpson appears effectively as the irresolute Lepidus, Joseph Holland as the piratical Pompey, Joseph Wiseman as a eunuch attendant, David Orrick as Agrippa, Douglas Watson as a worshipful soldier of Antony, Eli Wallach as a soothsayer, Robert Duke as a soldier of Caesar. The women's roles in the tragedy, with the exception of Cleopatra, are so negligible they need not have been written at all. The costumes of John Boyt and Valentina contribute greatly to the pictorial values of the evening.

There was no thought of economy in bringing the Shakespearean tragedy to life. There was none of the dullness Wednesday evening that seems to have predominated in the New Theater's notable but disastrous production of 1909. This new and soaring "Antony and Cleopatra" is a credit to the present-day theater, and a triumph for Miss Cornell. She breaks the jinx.

Journal American

NOVEMBER 23, 1947

Cornell Triumphs In Superb Offering

By ROBERT GARLAND

Don't let anybody tell you Katharine Cornell's Thanksgiving Eve production of William Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra", at the Martin Beck isn't the most exciting theatrical event of this or practically any other recent season.

At the peak of her distinguished and courageous on-stage career Miss Cornell, as both player and producer, has not heretofore displayed such distinction and courage as are manifest in her latest classical make-believe on W. 45th st.

For, in her revival—and "revival" is ill-chosen—it's as if you were in the presence of "Antony and Cleopatra" for the first time. She, with Guthrie McClintic's sensitive assistance, has triumphed where others have almost always failed.

Actresses, from the Divine Sarah down to the Profane Talulah, have long suspected that

"Antony and Cleopatra" is a worthier play than meets the eye when reading. Critics have pretty persistently agreed, from Ben Johnson down to Bob Garland.

So it has remained for the Katharine Cornell-Guthrie McClintic combination to unearth that worthier play. And, having unearthed it, to put it on with skill steeped in admiration, beauty strengthened with pace, and a heady sort of tenderness.

Once again, the First Dramatist of the English Speaking World has authored the best show in town.

'Handsome Theater'

I'm none too certain what my fellow members of the New York Drama Critics Circle expect the American Theatre to do. When, camouflaged by a couple of excellent English actors, a makeshift company of strolling players wear-

ing the garments of Old Vic—

Well, reading about them, you'd think the Englishers had revived the Creation with the original cast instead of Shakespeare, Shaw and Chekov unevenly. Yet, to one, Katharine Cornell's "Antony and Cleopatra" is merely a "painfully faithful transcript."

If Miss Cornell's current melodrama of love and passion—mostly passion, and lusty—is a painfully faithful transcription of William Shakespeare's original play, I just don't know what "painful" and "faithful" and "transcript" mean.

To my thinking, Miss Cornell, as player and producer, and Mr. McClintic, as director, have reached down into William Shakespeare's grab-bag of a drama and pulled out a masterpiece. What's more, it's high, wide and handsome theatre!

Now, at the Martin Beck, "Antony and Cleopatra" begins at the beginning and goes on swiftly until the end. All good plays should! Divided into two acts and unnumbered kaleidoscopic scenes, it has bite, clarity and dispatch. And, believe me, humor.

Big Roman Boy loves Big Egyptian Girl more tempestuously than John loves Mary. B. E. G. is beside herself all evening.

Impressive Cast

Katharine Cornell heads a lengthy cast that could scarcely be bettered. More impressive as

an actress than I have ever seen her, she's also more lovely to behold. Passion is an unbecoming garment. But she wears it with a difference.

And her voice is an instrument for moody music. Yet, like Judith Anderson in "Medea," you hear everything she says. Maybe, from now on, it'll be considered fashionable for an actress to be audible beyond the sixth row of the orchestra.

In a cast as excellent as that of this "Antony and Cleopatra," it's no easy matter to do individual justice. But it would be remiss not to hymn the fine, free acting of Godfrey Tearle as Antony, Kent Smith as Enobarbus and Lenore Ulric as Charmian.

These, and Ralph Clanton's Caesar, Douglas Watson's Eroa, Joseph Holland's Pompey and Ivan Simpson's Lepidus, are noteworthy. About the Thyreus of Robert Carricart, I'm not too certain. But, even so, he comes out rightly in the end.

The semi-permanent setting devised by Leo Kers is practical and pictorial, lending itself to the cinema-like rapidity of the piece's incessant movement. The men's costumes by John Boyt and the women's costumes by Valentina are as fitting as they are handsome.

Here, at the Martin Beck, is magnificence in play, playing and producing. It's the American theatre acting-up superbly.